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Television through the eyes of ordinary soldiers? The BBC's *The Great War* and eyewitness testimony

### Abstract

*One of the central features of the ground-breaking BBC documentary *The Great War* was the inclusion of eyewitness testimony. The material recorded for the series has been constantly re-used in BBC radio and television documentaries and in academic writing. However, the selection of witnesses in 1964 and the role they played in the documentary has received scant attention. Relying on documents available at the BBC Written Archives Centre and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, this article addresses the selection of eyewitnesses. It shows that more than a quarter of the veterans appearing in the series can best be described as elite voices. This qualifies the widely-held belief that the documentary gave voice to 'ordinary' people. Moreover, veterans' testimonies were not spontaneous, 'off-the-cuff' tales as recent First World War centenary coverage has suggested. They were often based on published autobiographies or similar written accounts. Finally, it is argued that the veterans were 'moral literary witnesses' whose storytelling was crucial in determining the tone of the series. Their accounts undermined the revisionist narrative advanced by the series' principal writers.*

In 1963 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) decided to produce a multi-episode television documentary to mark the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. Tony Essex and Gordon Watkins, the producers of the series,

approached the project with a sense of mission. 'We are telling a story as great as that of the Bible', Essex wrote to Watkins in early 1964.<sup>1</sup> He thought that the series was a 'once in a lifetime story' and that the British audience was looking to the BBC to say 'the last word on the subject'.<sup>2</sup> Eyewitness testimony came to play a vital part in the way Essex and Watkins decided to tell this 'once in a lifetime story'. It contributed to its success with the British audience because the witnesses added in the opinion of the viewers 'a powerful moral force' to the series.<sup>3</sup> *The Great War* also set new standards for historical documentaries on the 'small screen' and is often regarded as the beginning of oral history on television.<sup>4</sup> Scholars from various disciplines have engaged with the recordings and letters that the team behind *The Great War* collected in 1963 and 1964. The BBC made this material publicly available by depositing it at the Imperial War Museum in the 1970s. Moreover, the series itself became the object of historical investigation, mainly to assess its impact on the historiography and memory of the First World War.<sup>5</sup>

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War renewed the BBC's interest in *The Great War*. The corporation decided to rebroadcast all 26 episodes in the autumn of 2014. BBC Radio produced a series called *Voices of the First World War* that drew on material from the 1964 series. The BBC also commissioned a new documentary. *I Was There: The Great War Interviews* put the veterans recorded for *The Great War* centre stage.<sup>6</sup> The main achievement of this documentary, directed by Detlef Siebert, was the restoration of some of the raw film footage recorded in 1963 and 1964. This had also been deposited in the Imperial War Museum's archives. In contrast to the sound recordings, it had not been made available before. Siebert painstakingly matched the silent film footage with the audio tracks, thereby restoring material that had never been broadcast before.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the new one-hour long documentary, the BBC made five hours of restored film footage of the eyewitness accounts available online.<sup>8</sup>

While the use of archive footage in *The Great War* has been scrutinised, the story behind the recording of the veterans' testimonies has received scant attention. Instead, the BBC's own publicity about these accounts has remained largely unchallenged.<sup>9</sup> The broadcaster's narrative rested on the fact that the BBC published advertisements in newspapers at the time, asking First World War veterans to send in their stories of the conflict. According to the BBC, the production team received 50,000 letters. This was a remarkable response, even if the figure was most probably exaggerated. When the Imperial War Museum received the collection in the late 1970s, it estimated that it consisted of 20,000 letters. Recent research put the figure closer to 10,000.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the number, the BBC stressed that the production team went through the letters, contacted suitable veterans and recorded almost 300 of them. A little more than 100 appeared in the series as unnamed 'talking heads'. The series and the publicity around it deliberately gave the impression that *The Great War* was 'television through the eyes of ordinary soldiers,' as Julia Cave who was responsible for filming veterans for *The Great War* put it.<sup>11</sup>

It remains one of the series' main achievements that it added new voices to the history of the First World War. Yet this is not the full story. Documents available at the BBC Written Archives Centre show that the producers did not only select witnesses from the pool of letters they had received. They actively sought to engage some eyewitnesses that were known to them, either personally or through published work. Moreover, many veterans who appeared in the documentary might have been 'ordinary soldiers' during the war, but they can hardly be described as 'ordinary veterans'. Some rose to prominent public positions after the war; some published accounts of their wartime experience. As will be shown, more than a quarter of the witnesses included in the documentary series belong to this group. In Detlef Siebert's 2014 documentary the proportion was even higher: about half of the 'talking heads' can better be described as 'elite' rather than 'ordinary' voices.

After briefly exploring the story behind the reception and the making of *The Great War*, this article focuses on the eyewitnesses and their testimony. It explains how more prominent witnesses were selected and then explores three cases in detail. All three are drawn from the clips that are now available on the BBC website. Novelist Henry Williamson and German physician Stephen Westman are witnesses who had published their autobiographical writings. The third case, Kate Eckersley, was one of the 'ordinary' people who had responded to the BBC's appeal for witnesses. However, it will be shown that even she, like the published authors Williamson and Westman, did not give a spontaneous account of her wartime experience. In fact, she had written down her testimony and then delivered this account to camera.

Finally, it will be suggested that the producers of *The Great War* searched for and chose a particular kind of witness. Inspired by Avishai Margalit's recent work on the ethics of memory, these are labelled 'moral literary witnesses' here.<sup>12</sup> The veterans' testimonies played a crucial role in determining the essentially anti-war tone of the documentary series. This proved more powerful to the wider audience than the revisionist historical case which the writers had pushed in parts of the documentary.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Reception of *The Great War***

*The Great War* was a huge success with the British audience. Each episode attracted on average about eight million viewers when the series was broadcast on BBC1.<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of viewers wrote to the BBC and asked for a photo of the soldier who featured in the opening sequence of the series.<sup>15</sup> Newspaper reviews were also full of praise. *The Observer* found the first episode 'remarkably coherent as well as evocative'.<sup>16</sup> *The Times* argued that in contrast to many 'trivial' television productions the series proved 'how apt a medium television can be for illustrating historical episodes'.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary historians were less enthused. One prominent voice was Basil Liddell Hart; A. J. P. Taylor was another. Essex and Watkins had asked Liddell

Hart to act as 'military adviser' of the series. Yet the two producers also engaged John Terraine and Corelli Barnett as principal scriptwriters.<sup>18</sup> Both belonged to a new generation of military historians who were ambitious and not afraid of controversy.<sup>19</sup> In 1963, Terraine had published a revisionist account of General Douglas Haig, arguing that the commander of the British Expeditionary Force was far more skilled and far-sighted than previous studies had claimed.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation led to a public spat between Terraine and Basil Liddell Hart. Liddell Hart was sent drafts of episode scripts for comment. He found that episode 13 on the battle of the Somme portrayed General Haig in too positive a light. When the producers failed to respond to his criticism, Liddell Hart resigned publicly from his advisory role by sending a letter to *The Times*.<sup>21</sup>

A. J. P. Taylor's criticism focused on how *The Great War* used television as a medium. In his opening remarks at an academic conference which were reported in the press, he decried the series' 'monstrous use ... of historical material in order to create effects.'<sup>22</sup> Historian J. A. S. Grenville of the University of Leeds voiced similar sentiments about *The Great War*: 'The BBC series moved too fast for the sake of maximum dramatic impact but at the sacrifice of full comprehension; the course of the war was subdivided to such an extent that it was impossible to gain any notion of the whole.'<sup>23</sup>

While the criticism of the series' pace seems difficult to justify, the use of film footage was indeed problematic. The BBC team made an enormous effort to check and verify the available film material, which was often unlabelled and in very poor condition. Still, the series was rightly criticised for using some footage that was reconstructed shortly after battles. *The Great War* even included scenes from fiction films such as *Westfront* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>24</sup> Tony Essex issued detailed instructions to the film researchers, including warnings about reconstructed battle footage. Essex also told his researchers that if this kind of material was very good, these scenes would be acceptable 'so long as we do not claim them to be genuine'.<sup>25</sup> Yet there was no way for the viewers to distinguish between original and

reconstructed battle footage in the final edit. The producers later readily admitted that they had also tampered with the film itself. To make it easier for the audience to identify the opposing armies, they flipped over some of the material to ensure that Germans were always pointing from right to left and the British and French from left to right.<sup>26</sup> These inaccuracies motivated the BAFTA winning documentary film maker Hugh Purcell in the 1990s to speak out against showing *The Great War* again. He suggested that 'the series should be allowed to rest in peace'.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the criticism of some historians, *The Great War* occupies a prominent place in the history of documentary film making. The documentary's role in the history of television is also recognised. Indeed, this journal devoted a large part of the first issue of 2002 to the series. In his official history of the BBC Asa Briggs highlighted the significance of the documentary for the newly launched BBC2 as well as the staggering scope of the production and the considerable technical difficulties the BBC team had to overcome in adapting First World War footage to television.<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, probably the most significant and lasting impact of the series is the wealth of documents of First World War veterans the BBC researchers accumulated in 1963 and 1964. The collection of recordings of veterans' testimonies has been and undoubtedly will be of interest to researchers and the wider public. A detailed discussion of how and why these eyewitnesses were recorded adds an important dimension to future interpretations of this material.

### **The Making of *The Great War***

The editors of the BBC's *Tonight* programme discussed the idea of producing an in-depth documentary series to mark the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War as early as 1961. Watkins and Essex, the two producers of *The Great War*, were already involved at this early stage. However, plans to broadcast such a series at the end of 1962 were shelved because of staffing uncertainties.<sup>29</sup> In 1963, the

proposal to produce a First World War documentary and broadcast it first on BBC2 and repeat it on BBC1 was approved.<sup>30</sup> Essex drafted the outline for the 26 episodes. The ambitions of the BBC and the programme makers had major consequences for the project's budget. Time pressure as well as the acquisition of too much film material were the main reasons for spiralling costs. The BBC spent the astonishing amount of £275,000 (about £5,000,000 in today's money) for the series, more than double the originally budgeted £129,000.<sup>31</sup>

The project itself rested on two pillars. First, it sought to bring together original film material from all over the world. The Imperial War Museum's film repository was the principal source. But a few months into the project, the BBC's film researchers had collected material from more than twenty archives in eleven countries.<sup>32</sup> Once selected, the material was stretch-printed to adjust the original 16-frame per second footage to the current standard. Consequently, for the first time, the television audience could watch film from the First World War era that was not 'jerky'.<sup>33</sup> This technical innovation left a big impression on the audience who responded surprised and overwhelmingly positive to the wealth of material presented to them.<sup>34</sup>

Filming eyewitness testimony formed the second pillar of the project. Right from the first discussions about the series, the producers expressed the desire 'to contact and film certain picked survivors of the first world war.'<sup>35</sup> Focusing on surviving veterans did not mean that the documentary would not include the views of military and political leaders during the conflict. But as none of them was still alive, actors were used to read excerpts from their writings.

A public call for eyewitnesses was the main way of finding suitable veterans. As already mentioned, the BBC received thousands of replies. The producers formed a 'Research People Unit' to cope with the volume of letters.<sup>36</sup> Julia Cave, a young research assistant, contacted potential 'talking heads' and interviewing them over the telephone or in person. She decided in conjunction with the producers whether veterans were filmed or not. Cave also organised most of the filming. Contributors were



not interviewed but asked to narrate their stories 'direct to camera'.<sup>37</sup> The BBC also arranged the filming of veterans in the US, Canada and Australia. Julia Cave herself went to Paris and Hamburg in February 1964 to record French and German witnesses.<sup>38</sup>

### **Choosing eyewitnesses**

The voluminous correspondence between the BBC and the witnesses who were eventually filmed shows that the production team pursued a number of strategies to find and select veterans.<sup>39</sup> First, there were indeed those who were chosen because of their responses to the BBC's public call. Veterans who wrote long letters, added autobiographical manuscripts or elaborated on their stories in subsequent correspondence had the best chances of being selected.<sup>40</sup> The third case study, Kate Eckersley, represents this group.

The second group that stood a better chance of being filmed were veterans who responded to the BBC's public call and who referred to previously published life stories or their distinguished post-war careers. Horace Birks, who rose to the rank of major general in the Second World War, contacted the BBC in August 1963. He was invited to talk about the use of tanks in the battle of Cambrai.<sup>41</sup> Examples of veterans who had published their memoirs and who contacted the BBC include Charles Carrington, the author of *A Subaltern's War*<sup>42</sup> and Stephen Westman, our second case study.<sup>43</sup>

The team behind *The Great War* did not simply sit back and wait for suitable veterans to approach them. The producers also employed traditional journalistic research methods. One way was to take advantage of the BBC's resources. The producers sent an internal circular to their BBC colleagues and asked them to suggest suitable veterans. As a result, the producers contacted potential 'talking heads' who 'qualified' because of their book publications or their role in previous BBC programmes. Some had previously been employed by the BBC. An example was Dr Wilhelm

Eisenthal, formerly with BBC World's German service, who had published a book on his experience in the Austrian army in the 1930s. He had also contributed to the BBC Armistice broadcast in 1958.<sup>44</sup> As word spread about the project within the BBC, the producers were also approached by Walter Greenwood, the author of the best-selling working class novel *Love on the Dole*.<sup>45</sup> Tony Essex was delighted and agreed to pay the novelist a fee of £31-1s for his contribution, about four times as much as the standard payment the BBC offered veterans who were filmed.<sup>46</sup> Greenwood's testimony was used in episode 8 of *The Great War*.

Julia Cave and her researchers also contacted relevant organisations and institutes to find veterans. On recommendation of the Italian Institute, Cave wrote to Alexander Magri-Macmahon, a classics professor who had served with the Italian army in the First World War. He appeared in episode 25.<sup>47</sup> ANZAC veterans were found through the Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's League of Australia (RSS&AILA).<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the Imperial War Museum suggested contacting Robert Cotton Money, a career officer who had been promoted to major general in the Second World War. His testimony was included in episode 4.<sup>49</sup>

Major General Money proved helpful in another way: he was very willing to recommend other veterans to *The Great War* team.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, relying on the recommendations of eyewitnesses already filmed was yet another way for the BBC to find more 'talking heads'. Stephen Westman, for instance, suggested the leading aeronautical engineer Gustav Lachmann to Julia Cave. Lachmann had been a German air lieutenant in the First World War and had settled in Britain in the 1920s. He appeared in episode 7.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Tony Essex and Gordon Watkins approached veterans they had either met before or who were known to them through their published work. Most of them were well-known public figures who had pursued successful careers in politics, the military, the media or the arts. Among them were the two novelists Edmund Blunden and Henry Williamson. Williamson appeared in four episodes, as we will see in the case study.

The BBC producers also asked Cecil Arthur Lewis to contribute to the documentary. Lewis was one of the founding fathers of the BBC. In 1936 he had published a bestselling novel on the air war.<sup>52</sup> 'I have long been an admirer of "Sagittarius Rising",' Watkins wrote to Lewis, 'and I wonder whether you would consider facing the film cameras.'<sup>53</sup> The producers were sufficiently keen on his contribution that they agreed to the rather high fee of £40 that Lewis demanded for his testimony.<sup>54</sup>

In several episodes of *The Great War* the writers used excerpts from publications on the First World War. The authors of two of these books were approached and subsequently filmed. Herbert Sulzbach, at the time with the German embassy in London, appeared briefly in the last episode.<sup>55</sup> Sir Edward Spears, the author of *Liaison 1914*, featured very prominently in episodes three and four, so prominently indeed that he was the only 'talking head' in *The Great War* series whose name was mentioned in the narrative.<sup>56</sup> Spears served as liaison officer during the war and witnessed the early problems that arose between the British and French generals. Watkins had concrete ideas about the content of Spears' testimony. Prior to the filming he sent Spears a detailed list of talking points with page references to *Liaison 1914*.<sup>57</sup> Spears had a major political career after the war. He was Member of Parliament for Loughborough from 1922 to 1925 and for Carlisle from 1931 to 1945. In 1940, Winston Churchill promoted Spears to major general and made him his representative to the Free French government.<sup>58</sup> Apart from *Liaison 1914*, Spears wrote several other books, among them *Prelude to War*, from which episode 15 of *The Great War* quoted.<sup>59</sup>

As a result of the research and selection strategies the BBC team employed, a considerable number of prominent veterans was filmed. In addition to the four British novelists already mentioned, two German fiction writers were recorded.<sup>60</sup> Apart from major generals Horace Birks, Sir Edward Spears and Robert Cotton Money, major generals Channer and Wimberley appeared in *The Great War*.<sup>61</sup> The team also approached industrialists Sir Egburt Cadbury and Hans Howaldt. The racing driver and aviator Euan Rabagliati was included in episode 3 and New Zealand diplomat Sir Keith

Officer talked about Armistice Day in the final episode.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, one thing that many of these veterans had in common was that they had published books, some of them more than one. These books usually played an important role in their testimony as two of the three case studies illustrate.

## **Henry Williamson**

Henry Williamson was probably the most prominent eyewitness included in *The Great War*. He is best known for his novel *Tarka the Otter* (1927). Because of his books *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) and *A Patriot's Progress* (1930) his name is also often mentioned with authors such as Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, or Erich Maria Remarque, who had come to fame in the so-called war book boom of the late 1920s.<sup>63</sup> Williamson was a prolific writer. His First World War experience played a role in several novels, most notably in *The Fox Under My Cloak* (1955). What is more, Williamson had broadcasting experience. In the 1930s he recorded nature programmes for the BBC's Schools and Children's Hour.<sup>64</sup>

While being a published author made it more likely to be contacted and filmed by the BBC, it should be stressed that it did not guarantee inclusion in the series. Edmund Blunden was a case in point. Although excerpts of his *Undertones of War* (1930) were cited in episode 17,<sup>65</sup> his recorded testimony was not used. This seems a little surprising because Gordon Watkins had personally persuaded the author to be filmed. But none of the nine takes recorded with him included the pithy, iconic stories that Williamson told.<sup>66</sup> Williamson, on the other hand, became one of the producers' favourite 'talking heads', appearing in four episodes. He was even invited back to the BBC to be filmed a second time about the end of the war.<sup>67</sup> The three stories the producers chose from his first recording were personal accounts that stood for more significant events. In episode 15 Williamson described how his brigade advanced when the German army retreated to the Hindenburg line in March 1917. He highlighted in his

testimony the contrast between the 'utter brownness' and chaos of the trenches and the 'virgin country' behind it, where the British 'could gallop on the downs and see the hares and see larks'.<sup>68</sup>

Williamson had incorporated the other two stories the BBC filmed into his semi-autobiographical novel *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955). In episode 19 he remembered the execution of a deserter: 'He stood tied to a post against a wall and he was in civilian clothes and he had a piece of white paper pinned over the heart and we had to fire at that. We didn't know what the rifles were loaded with, some were loaded with ball, others with blank.' The depiction of the scene in his novel was very similar. However, Williamson's alter ego in the book, Philip Maddison, only heard about the execution, whereas in the BBC recording Williamson claimed that he was one of the soldiers pulling the trigger.<sup>69</sup> Still, the wording is almost identical: 'The deserter ... had been tied to a post, his eyes bandaged, a piece of white paper pinned over the heart. The firing squad's rifles were loaded by the provost, some with blank, others with ball, so that no man would know who shot him.'<sup>70</sup>

Two chapters of *A Fox Under My Cloak* were devoted to the 1914 Christmas truce.<sup>71</sup> In *The Great War* his account provided a powerful ending to episode 5. Williamson first explained how British and German soldiers shook hands and exchanged gifts. Observing Germans burying their dead he then noticed that they wrote on make-shift crosses 'For Fatherland and Freedom' and 'Here rests in God'. Astonished, Williamson asked a German how they could think that they were fighting for freedom and that God was on their side. "Oh yes, God is on our side" but I [Williamson] said "He is on our side". "Well, English comrade, do not let us quarrel on Christmas Day."<sup>72</sup> This poignant ending to Williamson's testimony was achieved through clever editing. Williamson's musings about his shock to find British and German soldiers so much alike just before the final sentence were cut out.<sup>73</sup>

A letter Williamson wrote to his mother in December 1914 shows that the inscription 'For Fatherland and Freedom' on German make-shift crosses had indeed

made an immediate impression on Williamson. He was, however, more matter-of-fact at the time, simply noting that the Germans 'obviously think that their cause is a ... just one'.<sup>74</sup> The inscriptions played an important role in the novel *A Fox Under My Cloak* as well.<sup>75</sup> While one could have doubts about the authenticity of the conversation with a German soldier Williamson cited in the BBC testimony,<sup>76</sup> for our discussion three different aspects are more significant. First, Williamson retold accounts of the execution and the truce that he had published before. This made his testimony not only more polished, it also made it more predictable for the producers of *The Great War*. Second, the Williamson case demonstrates that it is problematic that the veterans were not identified in the documentary. In Tony Essex's view the 'talking heads' stood for soldiers who had experienced what war was like. Not much else about their biography mattered.<sup>77</sup> Yet Williamson's later life seemed to have influenced the way he told the story of the Christmas truce. It is not only that he used the event in his literary output. He himself professed that the truce had altered his outlook on the world. In the 1930s he became an ardent admirer of Adolf Hitler. Williamson attended the 1935 Nazi party congress in Nuremberg, saw Hitler up close and was mesmerised.<sup>78</sup> A year later, in 1936, Williamson saluted 'the great man across the Rhine' in the foreword to his novel *A Flax of Dream* 'because the vision of a new world, dreamed by many young soldiers in the trenches and shell-craters of the World War, is being made real in one European nation at least'.<sup>79</sup> Against the background of his political views, it must also be seen as problematic that Williamson's testimony has since been used repeatedly, for instance in Detlef Siebert's 2014 documentary. The director was aware of Williamson's political ideas as he revealed in a BBC blog post. He had wondered whether these views 'had coloured his recollections of the truce'. Yet Siebert eventually dismissed his concerns because he thought the letter Williamson had written in 1914 'matched the account' in his BBC statement.<sup>80</sup> Viewers of Siebert's documentary were not given any information about Williamson's political convictions.<sup>81</sup>

Third, the producers of *The Great War* appreciated well-formulated, almost poetic testimony. They knew they could count on Williamson in this respect. Consequently, they invited him again when they felt the need to record appropriate eyewitnesses very late in the production cycle of the last episode. After several attempts at formulating his impressions of the end of the war, Williamson delivered in take four of his October 1964 recording the evocative language the producers were looking for: 'No more very lights going up with their greenish wavering flare. No lilies of the dead in the night. No flash of howitzers on the horizon. No downward droning of the shells. No machine guns. No patrols going out. Just nothing. Silence.'<sup>82</sup> A similar attempt in a later take that ended with the more political message 'It must never happen again', was not chosen.<sup>83</sup>

### **Stephen Westman**

Henry Williamson was not the only veteran who was filmed twice for *The Great War*. The team was also impressed with Professor Stephen Westman, a German gynaecologist who had emigrated to Britain in the 1930s and who had later set up a practice in London's Harley Street.<sup>84</sup> Julia Cave wrote to Westman after the first filming on 2 October 1963, thanked him for 'talking so marvellously to our cameras' and asked him to come back the following month.<sup>85</sup> The enthusiasm Cave showed in her letters to Westman was no understatement. His testimony was included in six episodes.<sup>86</sup> No other veteran appeared as often.

Westman had contacted the BBC in response to its advertisements in the press. In his short letter he pointed out that his recently published autobiography *A Surgeon's Story* covered his experiences as a German soldier on the Eastern and Western fronts.<sup>87</sup> The BBC team decided to invite him with the expectation of recording the accounts he had provided in the book. Julia Cave told Westman that it would hardly be necessary to talk before the filming about 'what we would like you to say ... as we have

read the relevant chapter in your book.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, much of Westman's recorded testimony mirrored the stories in his memoirs.

The parallels between Westman's autobiography and his account of the British bombardment during the 1916 battle of the Somme were particularly striking. 'For seven days and nights ... the shells – heavy and light ones – came upon us,' Westman remembered in episode 13. 'Our dug-outs crumbled ... we had to dig ourselves and our comrades out. Sometimes we found them suffocated, sometimes smashed to pulp ... Seven days and seven nights we had nothing to eat, nothing to drink.'<sup>89</sup> In *A Surgeon's Story* Westman used almost identical phrases: '... for seven days and seven nights the ground shook under the constant impact of light and heavy shells. Our trenches were levelled ... our dugouts crumbled ... we had to dig out ourselves and our comrades. Often we found them suffocated ... or crushed to pulp. We had nothing to eat or to drink.'<sup>90</sup>

Apart from the similarities between Westman's filmed testimony and his autobiographical writings, it is worth pointing out that the German's most extraordinary account was not included in *The Great War*. In front of the BBC cameras he provided this short but vivid description of how he killed a French soldier:

I was confronted by a French corporal, he with this bayonet at the ready and I with my bayonet at the ready ... In the fraction of a second I realized that he was after my life, exactly as I was after his. I was quicker than he was. I tossed his rifle away and I ran my bayonet through his chest. He fell, put his hand on the place where I had hit him, and then I thrust again. Blood came out of his mouth and he died.<sup>91</sup>

This oral account, again, matched the story in Westman's memoirs almost verbatim.<sup>92</sup> In his book as well as in his recorded testimony he also talked about his emotional reactions. He stressed that this killing haunted him for the rest of his life.



Westman then reflected on the peculiar situation of war, concluding that he normally would have liked to shake the Frenchman's hand. The BBC made the restored footage of Westman's full account of the killing the French corporal available online in 2014. The story also played a prominent role in Detlef Siebert's *I Was There: The Great War Interviews*. Two reviews of Siebert's documentary referred to Westman's description of the killing as some of the 'most poignant' testimony of the film.<sup>93</sup>

The poignancy and power of Westman's account of bayonetting an enemy soldier was not lost on the writers and producers of *The Great War*. An early draft of episode 3 reveals that they had planned to include it.<sup>94</sup> However, the draft script was ten minutes too long and cuts had to be made.<sup>95</sup> The surviving documents do not give a clue as to why this scene was finally omitted. Yet the draft script still provides some insight into the programme makers' thinking. The producers never intended to include Westman's general reflections on war or on possible friendship with the enemy, which he delivered passionately in the filmed testimony.<sup>96</sup> Instead, Westman's accounts that were incorporated into the documentary demonstrate *The Great War's* focus on making use of descriptive stories. Veterans were expected to talk about what they saw and what they did. Interpretative statements were usually edited out and so were more general reflections.

### **Kate Eckersley**

Women who decided to write to the producers were often uncertain if there was interest in their experiences as well. Only about 15 per cent of the letters sent to the BBC were written by women.<sup>97</sup> One of them was Kate Eckersley from Lancashire. In July 1963, she sent a 14-page letter to the BBC. Julia Cave phoned her in January 1964 and arranged a meeting in Manchester. Cave found Eckersley suitable to be filmed, noting that she recounted her life story as she did in the letter and that she 'talk[ed] v[ery] well and look[ed] very good'.<sup>98</sup>

In contrast to most 'talking heads' in the documentary, Kate Eckersley came from a working-class family. She was born in Rochdale, had 15 siblings and started to work at the local mill at an early age. 'I have had a very hard life,' she stressed at the beginning of her letter. She married very young. Her husband got recruited when the couple went to a show at the music hall in Manchester in December 1914. Vesta Tilly was singing patriotic songs and pushing young men to sign up. 'She put her hand on my husband['s] sho[u]lder and he got up and went with her to the [s]tage,' she wrote. Eckersley felt lonely after her husband had gone to France and she moved back to her mother. When he was on leave in January 1916 she saw him for the last time. In July, by then seven months pregnant, she was informed that her husband had died in the battle of the Somme. 'I could not understand,' Eckersley described her reaction. 'I fainted dead away ... I was in a dream and wanted to die[;] their [sic] was nothing to live for now.'<sup>99</sup>

Kate Eckersley repeated the stories she outlined in her letter in front of the BBC's cameras. Some passages were almost identical.<sup>100</sup> She frequently mentioned her financial situation and her earnings in the recording, as she did in her letter. This testimony was included in episode 8 that dealt with the situation of soldiers' wives: 'It was ... times was very, very hard, and I only had 12/6d. a week.'<sup>101</sup> Eckersley also vividly recounted the morning she learned about the death of her husband and her confusion and desperation afterwards. The culmination of her story was used in episode 14 to illustrate the enormous loss of life in 1916 and its impact on the home front: 'I'd no wish to live at all, because the world had come to an end, then, for me, because I'd lost all that I'd loved.'<sup>102</sup>

While *The Great War* gave its viewers some idea of the trauma Eckersley experienced, the series only provided a glimpse at her dramatic and emotional testimony. The recruitment of her husband by music hall star Vesta Tilly was not included in the series at all. One reason might have been that Eckersley's performance in front of the cameras was powerful, but it was not as fluent and polished as that of

many of the other veterans. Tony Essex felt the need to edit the description of her despair after the death of her husband 'to get her story clean', as he noted in the margin of a draft script.<sup>103</sup> As a result, episode 14 reflected Eckersley's despair, but it did not dwell on it.

Detlef Siebert's 2014 documentary demonstrated the potential emotional impact of Kate Eckersley's full account. He devoted a long sequence to Eckersley's testimony, overlaid with photos and accompanied by Vesta Tilly's song 'We don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go'.<sup>104</sup> The reviewer of Scottish newspaper *The Herald* was deeply moved by Eckersley's account: 'I cried at her story as it was so plain and understated.'<sup>105</sup>

Omitting a fuller version of Eckersley's testimony reflected the preferences of *The Great War*'s two main writers. They repeatedly complained that the series put too much emphasis on emotions. Corelli Barnett expressed his unhappiness when he found that emotional language was introduced to his script of episode 8. He argued that 'emotionally over-wrought' writing was not needed as the film footage was emotive enough.<sup>106</sup> A bitter dispute developed between Essex and John Terraine during the drafting of episode 13. Essex found Terraine's script on the battle of the Somme 'too detached and too detailed'. He complained that the historian's draft missed 'the intensely human element [emphasis in the original]' as well as the chance to get to know those veterans better who had been introduced in previous episodes. Essex demanded a script that was "a cry from the heart" instead of a somewhat cool appraisal'.<sup>107</sup> Terraine argued in reply that *The Great War* should avoid 'the cliché' of stressing the horror of the battle. He maintained that 'there must be a bit of stratosphere stuff' to support his revisionist argument. Terraine wanted to show that the British strategy of attrition did not only make sense, it was also beginning to work. 'Let's do justice. And let's be fresh,' he concluded.<sup>108</sup> Terraine was worried that his 'fresh' narrative would get lost in a documentary that focused on human suffering. His concern was justified. His revisionism was not lost on military historians like Basil Liddell Hart,

but the human suffering left a deeper impression on the audience than Terraine's argument. Correspondence from the audience showed that viewers were moved by the horror and suffering during the war and not by historical arguments.<sup>109</sup> Emma Hanna has argued that this reaction was due to 'the emotional nature of the film's images'.<sup>110</sup> While the First World War footage undoubtedly made an impact, it is the contention here that eyewitness testimony played a crucial role in determining the tone of *The Great War*. They had a powerful impact because the 'talking heads' were more than witnesses; they were what is termed 'moral literary witnesses' here.

### **Moral literary witnesses**

In his book *The Ethics of Memory* Avishai Margalit defines the 'moral witness' as a witness who tells us only 'what his or her eyes saw'.<sup>111</sup> More importantly, the 'moral witness' either experienced suffering or was at risk while bearing witness to suffering.<sup>112</sup> This gives the testimony in Margalit's view more meaning and power than accounts of eyewitnesses who were mere bystanders or observers. Finally, 'moral witnesses' are regarded as most effective when they speak for the many, or 'the "lot" of victims'.<sup>113</sup> Margalit developed his ideas against the background of genocidal violence. Yet there are parallels to the experiences of soldiers in the First World War. The violence was man-made and conscripted soldiers had little to no choice to escape from the situation. What is more, in their search for 'talking heads' the producers of *The Great War* were essentially trying to find veterans who had much in common with Margalit's 'moral witnesses'. Gordon Watkins stressed that veterans' individual stories should speak for the many. He was not interested in reminiscences that were 'too much of a personal anecdote'.<sup>114</sup> Tony Essex wanted to find veterans who could explain 'what fighting in the Great War was like ... what being under fire ... did to the spirit [emphasis in the original]'.<sup>115</sup> As a result, the team behind *The Great War* filmed 'moral witnesses' who had endured the horrors of trench warfare, naval battles, the air war or

who had suffered at the home front. Even if they survived the war unharmed, they had experienced suffering and danger like millions of other soldiers in the First World War.

Fulfilling the criteria of Margalit's 'moral witnesses' was essential but not sufficient for the BBC producers. Tony Essex aimed to recruit veterans with 'sensitivity, who noticed the details of war'.<sup>116</sup> They also had to be able to perform in front of the camera. The producers insisted that 'only the most fluent' were filmed.<sup>117</sup> In practice the BBC team's selection process privileged witnesses who had previously produced a written version of their recollections. This was obviously the case for published authors Williamson or Westman. Both used their writings to mould the style of their testimony. It is remarkable how similar their recorded testimony was to their published work. As a result, there was a literary quality to their witness statements. This may have been understandable from a production values point of view, but it undermined the intention to present the voice of the 'simple Tommy'.

Kate Eckersley also relied on accounts she had committed to paper. Autobiographical writing like her correspondence with the BBC defies simple categorisation,<sup>118</sup> yet Eckersley's letter contained literary features. It showed composition and style, had emotional elements and was 'an expression of life through the medium of language', as William Henry Hudson defined literature more than a hundred years ago.<sup>119</sup> Eckersley should therefore also be regarded as a 'moral literary witness', however different the writing in her letter was from the polished publications of Williamson and Westman. While clips of witness statements made up only about eight per cent of *The Great War*,<sup>120</sup> their literary quality combined with the televisual presence of survivors of the horrors of war made them particularly powerful.

## Conclusion

In March 2014, the London *Telegraph* published a glowing review of Detlef Siebert's documentary *I Was There: The Great War Interviews*. It highlighted the

veterans' 'immaculately formed prose' and saw this as evidence that the witnesses were 'products of a more elegant age'. 'This was off-the-cuff stuff,' the review went on. 'It is amazing what a difference it can make to the vividness of an interview to have a subject that can talk prose-poetry.'<sup>121</sup> The journalist's enthusiasm illustrates the impact statements of 'moral literary witnesses' can have on viewers. It also provides further support for the assertion that this testimony played a crucial role in determining the tone of *The Great War*. The stories of hardship and suffering helped reinforce the popular perception of the senselessness of the conflict. 'It brings home to me, and I am sure all who have followed it, the utter futility of war,' one viewer summarised his reaction according to the BBC audience report on episode 20.<sup>122</sup>

Witness recordings for documentaries generally take place under unusual circumstances. They involve arranging the time of the filming, choosing a location, the use of equipment and a team of people operating it.<sup>123</sup> When we watch recordings of First World War survivors that were made more than fifty years ago, it is helpful to know more about the context of the filming. To begin with, the title of Detlef Siebert's 2014 documentary *I was there: The Great War Interviews* is misleading because the witness recordings were not interviews. A researcher from the BBC spoke to potential witnesses prior to the filming to make sure that they could speak well. Suitable veterans were then asked to narrate statements direct to camera. Moreover, the performances of what we called 'moral literary witnesses' can hardly be described as 'off-the-cuff stuff', as the *Telegraph* put it. The BBC's selection of witnesses privileged veterans who had provided written accounts of their experience. Frequently they repeated published testimony. A considerable number of them were also highly educated, successful public figures. Some, like Williamson, were novelists. The 'prose-poetry' the *Telegraph* noticed in the testimony resulted from the way *The Great War* team searched for, selected and prepared veterans for the filming. It was not an accident and hardly an indication that the veterans were 'products of a more elegant age'.

Reflecting on recorded witness statements and their availability in archives, Aleida Assmann noted that 'video testimony "survives" the survivor and has the capacity to address numberless viewers and listeners.'<sup>124</sup> Future viewers and listeners will make sense of these video sources in their own personal way. *The Great War* team left behind an important collection of statements of 'moral literary witnesses'. The team's production and correspondence files shed light on how and why veterans were filmed. They provide an additional dimension to the testimony. It offers plenty of avenues for more nuanced understanding and interpretation of the veterans' recordings as well as exciting material for future research.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading (hereafter BBC WAC), T32/1, 152/1, Essex to Watkins, 30 January 1964. The BBC is the copyright holder of the material quoted from the BBC WAC and has kindly allowed the use of BBC copyrighted extracts within this work.

<sup>2</sup> BBC WAC, T32/1, 158/1, Essex to Milne (H.T.P.(Tel)), 20 January 1964.

<sup>3</sup> BBC WAC, R9/7/69, Audience Research Report Television VR/64/308, 13 July 1964; N. C. Fleming, *Echoes of Britannia: Television History, Empire and the Critical Public Sphere*, *Contemporary British History*, 24:1 (2010), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York, 2012), 309; Steve Humphries, *Oral History on Television: A Retrospective*, *Oral History*, 36:2 (2008), 100; Alex Danchev, 'Bunking' and Debunking: The Controversies of the 1960s, in: Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford, 1991), 279; Emma

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10 Hope Wolf, 'Something yet Unpublished': Anecdotes in the Imperial War Museum's Archive of the 1964 Series, *The Great War*. PhD Thesis (University of London, 2010), 11. BBC WAC, T32/1/1,158, Suddaby to Cousins, 28 March 1979.

11 Julia Cave in *That was the Great War That Was* (Peter Jenkins, BBC, 2003).

12 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 148-151.

13 On *The Great War's* impact on historiography and popular conception see: Danchev, 'Bunking' and Debunking, 279-281; Todman, Reception of The Great War, 30; Hanna, *Great War on the Small Screen*, 58.

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- 32 BBC WAC, T32/1,158/1, 'The Great War Progress Report', October 1963.
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- 34 BBC WAC, R9/7/70, Audience Research Report Television VR/64/461, 11 September 1964.
- 35 BBC WAC, T32/1,158/1, Watkins to Assistant Head of Talks, Television, 5 April 1961.
- 36 Ibid., 'The Great War: Progress Report', October 1963.
- 37 BBC WAC, T32/1,140/8, Watkins to von Spiegel, 18 November 1963.
- 38 Ibid., Cave to von Spiegel, 6 March 1964; BBC WAC, T32/1,160/1, Cave to Brent, 20 March 1964; BBC WAC T32/1,135 Programmes as broadcast, Television Service – BBC 2, 20 September and 11 October 1964. BBC WAC, T32/1,158/1, 'The Great War Progress Report', October 1963.
- 39 The correspondence with the witnesses who were recorded remained in the BBC archives and were not given to the Imperial War Museum.
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- <sup>46</sup> BBC WAC, T32/1,160/3, Essex to Greenwood, 26 September 1963.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., Cave to Magri-Macmahon, 15 September 1964; Scowen to Magri-Macmahon, 16 November 1964.
- <sup>48</sup> In this way the BBC found Frank Brent, who appeared in episodes 9 and 13. BBC WAC, T32/1,160/1, Cave to Brent, 12 March 1964.
- <sup>49</sup> BBC WAC, T32/1,135, Programmes as Broadcast, Television Service – BBC 2, 20 June 1964.
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- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., Lewis to Cave, 5 November 1963; Lewis to Watkins, 8 November 1963; BBC Talks Television to Lewis, 18 November 1963.
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- <sup>58</sup> Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags: The Life of Major-General Sir Edward Spears* (London, 1997).
- <sup>59</sup> Edward Spears, *Prelude to Victory* (London, 1939). BBC WAC, T32/1,135, Programmes as Broadcast, Television Service – BBC 2, 5 September and 22 November 1964.
- <sup>60</sup> Baron Edgar von Spiegel and Ascan Klée-Gobert.
- <sup>61</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert was filmed but not included in the series.
- <sup>62</sup> BBC WAC, T32/1,160/4, Broadway to Rabagliati, 24 October 1963; BBC WAC, T32/1,150/1, Watkins to Essex, 21 October 1963; BBC WAC, T32/1,160/3, Cave to Officer, 5 October 1964. On Officer's career see: Alan Fewster, *Trusty and Well Beloved: A Life of Keith Officer* (Carlton, 2009).
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- <sup>64</sup> Lois Lamplugh, *A Shadowed Man: Henry Williamson, 1895-1977* (Devon 1990), 86.
- <sup>65</sup> BBC WAC T32/1,135 Programmes as broadcast; Television Service – BBC 2, 20 September 1964.
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- 90 Westman, *Surgeon's Story*, 59.
- 91 *The Great War* (BBC, 1964), episode 3.
- 92 Westman, *Surgeon's Story*, 44: 'I was suddenly confronted by a French corporal, both of us with our bayonets at the ready ... in a fraction of a second I realised that he was after my life as I was after his. I was quicker than he ... I pushed his long triangular steel aside and ran my bayonet through his chest. He fell and put his hands over the place where I had hit him. I thrust him again, he bent in agony, and the blood shot out of his mouth.'
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- 100 In her letter Eckersley described her marital home this way: 'We had already got a little house in Clayton[,] it was 3/6d a week[:] our house was furnished ... and it was a [p]alace. We were so happy. I cant [sic] tell you how much.' In the BBC recording she said: 'Eventually we got a house in Clayton for 3/6d a week and we got it furnished and we lived there and we was very, very happy because we was very much in love.'
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